UNDERSTANDING THE TRIBAL CULTURAL TRAITS OF ATTAPADI

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is attempting to unravel the cultural heritages, traditions, customs and cultural traits of Attapaddi, block of Mannarkad Taluk in Palakkad district of Kerala. Tribes were distinguished from castes on the basis of their religious and ecological conditions. A good number of them today live in villages and have been engaged in agriculture and allied occupations just like peasants belonging to various castes and communities. The tribal’s are part of the Indian culture and they perform various rituals that mainly save the environment. The tribal culture is mainly composed of elements of nature. The paper high lightened the major issues of the tribes like social, religious and educational and health related problems and other cultural traits and recommended some suggestions. A radical change was occurred after the implementation of different welfare programmes of the government, their lifestyle, occupational pattern, food habit, health culture and social life was totally changed.
KEYWORDS

Culture, Tribe, Peasant, Rituals, Religion, Casts, Customs, Traditions, Climate, Social, Political

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The study on tribal life and their cultural setting is very relevant in the present scenario to understand the primitive and marginalized people of India. In order to carve out a field of tribal studies we need to understand a set of distinctive issues such as land, forest, myth and language. Attapadi is a tribal pocket in Palakkad district, which lies in the north–eastern part of Kerala. The process of acculturation of tribes of Attappadi has begun due to the technological revolution and political, social and educational measures of welfare state. I am very keen to observe these historical changes taken place in the life of tribes in Attappadi mainly in tribes of Irulas, Mudugas and Kurumbas belong to the broad group of Dravidians. The life of all these three tribes is much entwined with culture. Attapadi tribes give much importance to tradition, customs and cultural traits. Tribal settlements in Attapadi are known as Ooru. The plight of tribe’s folk continues to be steeped in the morass of ignorance, illiteracy and poverty. Hence I found out so many profound changes in the life of Attappadi tribes. The distinctive features of the tribes are definite common topography, sense of unity, endogamous group, and common dialect, ties of blood relationship, protection awareness, distinct political organization and common culture.

The process of deforestation (1940-1950), subsequent environmental issues like climate change, shrinking water resources and seizing of tribal welfare funds and land by illegal nexus of
contractors, political intermediaries, and bureaucrats badly affected the life of tribes. Tribal’s lost their traditional agricultural livelihood and they forced to abandon their old cultivation of ragi, corn, millets and pulses. The migrants to Attappadi seized the land of tribes and pushed them out of their land and traditional livelihood. Earlier attempts have been taken to learn tribals of Attappadi with sociological and Anthropological point view. No historical work has been came out which entirely focused on changes happened in the social and cultural history of tribes in Attappadi. My research problem is that how the demographic changes, state sponsored measures, technological revolution changed drastically the distinctive culture of tribes in Attappadi. My important question is that of do these changes have been detrimental to the cultural, social and political life of tribes in Attappady. In many religion tribal groups lived by hunting animals and gathering forest produce. They used many forest shrubs and herbs for medical purpose. They sold forest produce in the local market.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY**

- To understand the tribal life and major problems, changes and issues faced by the tribal’s in Attappadi
- To assess the reasons of their isolation and backwardness
- To study about socio- cultural, religious and economic aspects of tribes.
- To study about the dynamic changes among the tribes due to external factors.
RELEVANCE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Each Culture had its own independent history. The history of each group is distinct, all cultures are taken as equal, and one culture may not be judged according to the standard of the other. Tribals are integral part of society and culture. They possess a very rich culture and tradition. They represent a way of life that was common to India at the time when Indian culture began. They also represent many values that other part of India has lost. Their culture and tradition are changing and vanishing. The cultural aspect of the tribes should be recorded before they vanish under the impact of acculturation and other forces of changes. This study will be helpful to reconstruct he tribal culture of the past. Tribal cultures give us an idea of the initial primitive levels of cultural raw materials that contributed to the development of Indian culture. Modern tribes are unreflective and imaginative persons and their ideas throw light on the ideas of primitive society.

The Nineteenth Century evolutionists used comparative method, that is, reconstruction of past through the use of living tribal people an example of earlier stages. Edward Tylor, is often called the ‘father of Ethnography ‘developed the concept of survivals’, which became important in the evolutionary reconstruction of past societies. D. D. Kosambi observes that India shows extra ordinary continuity of culture and other Living survivals of observance which can only have originated in the most primitive stages of human society. The past cultural traits that still survive among the present day tribe are very important to the understanding of Indian Culture because, as Kosambi has rightly observed, ‘the entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into a general society.’
Tribal question is a burning question of the nation. The problems that these tribal’s face may hinder the all round development of India. The debate on tribal development is also a debate over modern development and its impact on eco system and marginalized tribal’s. As the tribal’s are the weakest and marginalized sections of the society, special program for their empowerment and upward mobility and to integrate them with mainstream of society, to be designed and executed. Knowledge of the present socio- economic and cultural life will certainly be valuable for planning schemes for the betterment of the tribes, irrespective of their color, physical stature and location of habitation.

This study will be helpful in assessing the need of the tribes and providing the help where it is actually required. It may serve as an ‘eye opener’ to the government authority and the people who want to make progressive changes in our society. A shared vision of tribal history can lead to common vision for an egalitarian society where tribals get their due place amongst the other people of the country. More over tribal history should be reinterpreted from the perspective of contemporary problems like marginalization, land alienation, globalization, identity crisis, social mobility etc. The writing of a common history of tribal’s and non tribal should be done with the aim of exposing the historical background of the tribal problems and the challenges which are found unsolved on the way of mobilizing these marginalized.

**SOURCES AND METHODS**

Fieldwork is the main method of the present study. The data from the study of social institutions and material culture of the tribal’s are very important, as it is difficult to achieve the objective from the study
of documentary evidences alone. Ideas relating to historical relationship and processes may actually be tested in the field where various aspects of the tribal society and culture are still in operation.

Standard anthropological methods and techniques (like interviews, observations both participant and non-participant) are used in the fieldwork. About all the tribal habitats in the Attappadi were visited and observed their life and culture. The tribal’s, non tribe people live in the neighboring areas, forest officials, Tribal Developments Department personals, tribal school teacher, tribal co-operative staffs and tribal leaders are interviewed. The data collected through interviews are verified by using observation methods and cross-checking the same with the key informants in each group.

Oral sources widely used in the present study. In recent years, ethno-historians and anthropologists, with historical interests have demonstrated convincingly how oral tradition can be recorded, collected, checked and utilized for historical purposes. Oral traditions are found in a variety of forms covering a wide variety of subject matter. They reflected the history, the social units within the society, village and lineage, and cultural performances of their past. They also perform the specific function of relating groups to each other and which validate or correct local claims and support relationship.

As it is difficult to identify every individuals and groups adequately, the present study is supplemented by written documents also. The previous ethnographic accounts by anthropologists, official administrators, foreign travelers and Christian missionaries are referred. The official records, land surveys, legal documents are also used.
ETHNOGRAPHIC LITERATURE ON THE TRIBES OF KERALA

Even though Ethnographic literature began in the in the second half of the 19th century, it was in 20th century so many literary works have produced related to Ethnographic reports and information by Christian missionaries and anthropologists. Padre Fenicios’s work on *Todas of Todamala* was the pioneering work which has provided the earliest ethnographic references on the tribal’s of Kerala. Logan’s *Malabar Manual* provides many references about the hilly tribes of Kerala like *Paniyar, Malasar, Kurichiar, Kurumbar* or *Kuruvar*.

Edgar Thurston’s *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India* is the first attempt to deal with ethnographic survey report on South India which exclusively pertaining to the customs and ceremonies related to marriage, death, religion etc. of South Indian tribal’s. Castes and Tribes of Southern India authored by Thurston is a remarkable work which gives detailed description of South Indian castes and tribes in alphabetical order. M.A. Sherring’s *The tribes and Castes of Madras Presidency* mentions about the tribal’s like *Irulas, Kurumbas* etc. were belonged to Attappadi region. A Aiyappans’s Report on the *Socio-Economic Conditions of Aboriginal Tribals of Madras* is outstanding work in the anthropological studies. He gives detailed information about the changes in the social life of different tribes in sociological point of view. Tribal Situation authored by P.R.G Mathur’s work *Tribal situation in Kerala* discusses the major problems faced by tribals in Kerala. He mentions *Kurumbas* of Attappadi and *Cholnaikar* are the two most primitive tribes in Kerala.

Dr. Binpu, *Ethno Biology of the Kurumbas of Attappadi* is a report on the evaluation study of schemes implemented in the tribal
development Bloch. It has only focused on giving the present conditions of social life of tribal’s. Dr. S Bindhu “Ethnobiology of Kurumbars of Attappadi gives a detailed account of Kurumbas of Attappadi. Dr. S Bindu authored another book titled Action Anthropology in Kurumba’s tribe is an important work to study Kurumba tribes in the anthropological point of view. It describes the social cultural aspects of Kurumba’s. The work of Nithya N.R titled Globalization and the Plight of tribals explains the changes taken place in the tribal as part of globalization process. Reports and Proceedings of Attappadi Hill Development Society (AHADS) and Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) are very valuable depository of knowledge. Jekka Parthasarathy has written a work titled Education and Development among the tribes of Udhagamangalam provides information about education conditions of tribes.

HYPOTHESIS

Through the preliminary reading of different books on the area and exploration and field trips to different tribal hamlets in Attappadi it came to understand that there was a profound change in terms of social, cultural, political life of tribes at Attappadi in the last fifty years. The process of acculturation and changes in lifestyles and social and cultural pattern of tribes in the Attappadi was due to mainly of technological revolution, state sponsored interventions and initiative, migration of people from different parts of Kerala and outside Kerala. The ill-treatment migrants and the process of deforestation (1940-1980) and subsequent environmental issues like climate changes, shrinking water resources badly affected the life of Attappadi.
**SUGGESTIONS**

The government should provide necessary steps to the inclusion of local culture and history in the curriculum which will help their self-confidence. Tribal communality in Attappadi needs a special health plan which should be constructed on the basis of the needs of tribal people. The government should take the initiative to establish agro-based education and training institutions and labour intensive processing industries in this area and also tribal and eco friendly development policies and programmes should be initiated. Awareness programmes for sanitation, health, education and hygiene and for information of the government special programes for the tribal’s should be promoted. Tribals should be allowed to develop according to their own genius. Tribals rights in land and forest should be respected. Tribal team should be trained to undertake administration and development without too many outsiders being inducted.

**CONCLUSION**

Tribal community in Attappadi has been the most vulnerable community. Their fundamental human rights are violated in every step of life. Tribals are backward and poor, living in naturally isolated regional inhabitant. Tribal’s in Attappadi are earlier devoid of common infrastructure facilities of road and communication, health and education and safe drinking water and sanitation, which do not allow them to absorbed technological and financial help provided by government. Scheduled tribes are indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness. The process of Acculturation due to the external factors very much affected the distinctive social and
cultural life styles of Tribal’s of Attappadi. Technological revolution, demographical changes due to the large scale migration have been changed the identities of Adivasis of Attappadi region. Due to the external interference and intermingling of mainstream people, tribes in Attappadi started to abandon their age—old traditions and social customs. The Irulas and Mudukas were more exposed to modern education. They have been intermingling with the others and subsequently they got good education and availed government jobs. They are in a transitional stage where education and modern facilities always plenty because of government intervention. But Kurumbas still lead a primitive mode life and very less exposed to education and modern amenities. Most of them still live in the deep forest of Attappadi. Kurumba tribes are still live in the relative isolation. The governmental programmes implemented in Kerala for the uplift and rehabilitation of tribal does have not been able to achieve their goals and tribal proletariaisation has persisted since independence.

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